

4. Revelation: Ephesus – The Loveless Church

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Introduction:

- Can you please turn to the 2nd letter to the Ephesians? Not sure where it is? Revelation chapter 2... 😊 You see, this is the second letter written to the church that is recorded in the Bible. The first letter was written by the apostle Paul in 63AD to the Ephesian church where he encouraged them that they might abound in love. About 30 years later the apostle John under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit wrote another letter to the same church at Ephesus pointing out a problem that occurred in the preceding three decades: The fact that they had lost the flame and excitement for their “first love.”
- We are now in the second of three main sections in the book of the Revelation. Revelation 1:19 gives us the outline for the book. Jesus says to John, **“Write the things that you have just seen.”** That was the vision of John face-to-face with the majestic, glorified Christ whose face was shining like the sun and whose voice is like mighty waters thundering waters.

Number two he said, **“Write the things which are.”** This is all about the messages to the seven churches in John’s day which also teach us about all churches of all ages. But what you need to understand is that when we talk about churches, we are also talking about individual Christians... people like you and me. Some of you are like the believers in Ephesus, some of you are like the believers in Smyrna, in Pergamum, in Laodicea, in Sardis. So look for yourself in each one of these churches. That’s the present tense - the things that are right now. That was true in 90 A.D. when John wrote this and it is true in 2023. This is the present tense we are going to be studying.

Then beginning in chapter 4, verse 1 then we begin to look at the future. He said, **“Write the things which shall be hereafter.”** If you were to ask me whether we’ll finish studying the book of Revelation before all these things really start happening... Who knows? Jesus Christ could come back at any moment. However, we’re to be faithful until then. Let’s read and see

- what John wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to the church at Ephesus, the second epistle to the Ephesians [TITLE SCREEN].
- **Chapter 2:1: “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write.”** The word angel can and most often means “a ministering spirit” but the word itself simply means “messenger” and in this context I believe he is writing to the human messenger—you might say the pastor, the bishop, the elder, the overseer over each church. So he writes this letter to the pastor of the church—the human messenger—who is to share it with the congregation. Who is the letter from? It’s not from John - ***it’s from Jesus***. Jesus says in **verse 1, “These are the words of Him who holds the seven stars in His right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.”** That’s Jesus. We were introduced to Him in the last chapter.
- In verses 2-3 Jesus says, **“I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for My name, and have not grown weary.”** Now He says “all of that is wonderful and I’m proud of you for that.” **“Yet I hold this against you.”** Jesus says **“You have forsaken your “first love.”(v4)** That’s the whole point of this message. What happens when you lose the glow for that “first love?” Jesus said, **“Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. But you do have this in your favour: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.” (5-6)** I want you to notice that Jesus didn’t say he hated the Nicolaitans? Did you notice that? He hates the practices of the Nicolaitans.

● Jesus ends this letter to the church in Ephesus the way He ends all seven of them – with an admonition, and I say this to everyone here this morning, *“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”* That means “Listen up! If you’ll do more than just sit there, if you’ll pay attention, if you’ll really put on your spiritual ears run up your spiritual antenna you’ll learn something!” This is what Jesus says, *“To him who overcomes I will give the right to eat from the tree of life which is in the paradise of God.” (v7)*

● In almost every letter that Jesus sends to these seven churches,
(1) He says something good about the church, and then
(2) points out something that’s wrong with the church.
You see, there’s no such thing as a “perfect church.” In each one of these seven letters, He generally talks about the good things first and then says, “But there are some problems and let’s talk about the problems”. But He doesn’t just stop there....
(3) He gives the solution. He says, “This is what you ought to do as a result of it.” And so the message today and the letter He writes to the church at Ephesus naturally falls into three sections.

● I. PRAISE FOR THE CHURCH

First, consider the praise for the church, because he says some good things about it. This was the church located in Ephesus. What church was it? Ephesus Baptist Church? The Methodist Church Ephesus? Assembly of God in Ephesus? What was the name of it? I hope you realise that churches only began using denominational names like that in the last few hundred years. The way it was in the beginning and the way God intended it, there was a body of Christian believers in the city of Ephesus. They didn’t all necessarily meet together in the same place but every believer in the city was considered the church in Ephesus. They didn’t have a building; they didn’t have a beautiful building with pianos and carpets and lights and cameras. They met in homes, house to house, and then they would meet in open areas for the large gatherings. That’s the way the churches were back then.

The city of Ephesus was one of the most important cities of the ancient world. In fact, the three greatest cities of the Roman Empire were Rome, Antioch and Ephesus. However, Ephesus had a problem. It was the centre of an occultist, fertility type of pagan religion. It was a religion that basically worshiped sexual reproduction. They would pray to Artemis (Diana) who was also called the Great Mother and she was the goddess of virginity and motherhood. There were a lot of lewd and vile practices going on in this city much of which was appealing to the flesh, and there was also a preoccupation with the black magic arts.

Perhaps some of you are familiar that Ephesus was home to one of the seven wonders of the ancient world? Before I tell you what it was, I’ll remind you of the other seven wonders....

- (1) the Lighthouse of Alexandria,
- (2) in Cairo, Egypt, there is the Great Pyramid of Giza,
- (3) the 40 foot high statue of Zeus in Olympia, Greece made of ivory and gold,
- (4) in Babylon, modern day Baghdad, Iraq, there were the hanging gardens, Saddam Hussein was rebuilding because he believed he was Nebuchadnezzar reincarnated,
- (5) The tomb of King Mausolus in Halicarnassus was another ancient wonder,
- (6) The statue of Colossus that stands in the opening of the harbor at Rhodes, Greece.

● But the seventh—and some say the greatest—of the seven wonders of the ancient world was the temple of Artemis set across the river from the city of Ephesus. It was a massive building 130m long and 84m wide with 360 columns rising 18m high. It was an enormous place and there were all kinds of places for people to gather inside. It was also very mysterious, with inner sanctums and things like that. Kings from around the world donated each one of those 360 columns. Each one of those columns was ornately carved up to the height of a man and you could spend many days walking around the Temple just looking at the artwork engraved in those columns.

- **1. Diligence:** These Christians in Ephesus lived in that kind of a setting. Yet they were a church Jesus wrote to and said, “I want to say some good things about your church. There are some things I am proud of and I want to praise you for this!” He mentions at least three things. Number one He says, *“I’m proud of you because of your diligence...I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance.”* He says, “The one thing I can say for you is that you are busy serving the Lord.”

Now, this was a church that was very active and very busy. If there’s something good about being active and busy as a Christian, it’s that you don’t have the time to sit back and complain about all the things that you don’t like. God is omniscient, all-knowing, omnipresent and He says, *“I know your works.”* Do you know that He knows all about your works? Everything you do, and everything you ought to do but don’t? Specifically, they were a serving church who laboured hard and to the point of exhaustion... and they are commended for this... however the danger with so much activity in a church is that you can lose your *‘first love’* if you are doing all this religious activity in the flesh.

- **2. Doctrine:** He says, “I’m proud of you because of your doctrine.” Look at the last part of verse 2. He says, *“I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false.”* In other words he says “You don’t let just anybody come in your church and preach. You are very careful about what is taught.” It was much more important back in those days to maintain correct doctrine because they did not have the written completed New Testament like we have. Church, you don’t know how blessed we are to be able to come here Sunday after Sunday and for us to say, “Let’s open the gospel according to Mark and let’s see what Jesus said and let’s see what Jesus did.”

We can open the gospel according to John or we can open Paul’s letter to the Romans and we can read it and it’s God’s word inspired we have in our hands. But they didn’t have that! On a side note, because they didn’t have the New Testament as we have it, do you know how Paul would preach about Jesus to people and how he would witness to them? We are told in *Acts 28:23*, *“From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets”* ... in other words, evangelism was done by Paul using OT prophecies of the Messiah and the Ten Commandments. Interesting, isn’t it?

- But He also says in v.6, *“You have this in your favour. You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans.”* Somebody told me one time *“I thought that was vanilla, strawberry and chocolate ice cream.”* ☺ The word Nicolaitans tells us what these people were doing. The word *laitans* or *laity* means people. The word *nico* means to chop or to divide. Jesus is saying, *“There are certain people in your church that have been doing that... they have been trying to divide people up into groups by spreading their false doctrine. I’m proud that you hate what I hate.”* This is why doctrine is so important. Do you know that there are churches that will allow a man to get up and speak, and if he holds a qualification of high education or perhaps has authored a few books, he can preach the vilest lie ever vomited from the mouth of hell and many will drink it down. He may distort many doctrines of the gospel, blaspheme the Holy Trinity of God, he might trample down the value of the blood of the Son of God, and declare that he is made in the image of God, and therefore he is a mini-God, and yet nothing will be said about it so long as he spices it up with good humour and wit. As long as he is well-known, has a big successful ministry, has authored several books, and has little letters after his names stating his qualifications... then who cares what he says... it must be right because look at what it’s done for him! Don’t be deceived by appearances! One of the biggest heresies being spread by the Nicolaitans was that you can be saved and at the same time live immoral lives... especially in a sensual city like Ephesus! In other words, as long as you’ve asked for forgiveness and have Jesus in your heart, you can do whatever you please and it doesn’t affect your salvation. However,
- the NT clearly teaches the contrary in *1 Cor. 6:9-10*. So, don’t just believe everything you hear but test the spirits. There is a lot of heresy in our day... even on Christian television!

● II. PROBLEM IN THE CHURCH

He then jumps to the problem in the church. He says, *"I hold this against you. You have forsaken (left) your 'first love.'"* Let's talk just a little bit about "first love." It's usually in the teenage years that you might experience "first love." For the girls, isn't it exciting when all of a sudden a guy shows a little interest in you? He sends you this little note that says something like this: *"I like you. Do you like me? Even if you don't like me, I'll still like you. From Johnny."*

Or you're a guy and you grow up just hating girls. But then you start looking around and they start looking a little bit better. Suddenly, they start changing and your attitude is, *"When I stop hating girls, she's going to be one of the first ones I stop hating."* And you fall in love! Actually that's not correct. You don't fall in love... you fall in holes! And you don't fall out of love either... you fall out of trees! So anybody who talks about falling in love or falling out of love doesn't understand love. Love is a decision.

The different kinds of love are listed in the New Testament. A very popular love is eros, which is romantic love... and I'm sure everybody in this room can relate to what I am talking about. There is something special about that "first love." But this isn't talking about romantic love here... but I want to give you some characteristics of a "first love" and I want you to compare it to your love for Jesus, because there are relatable comparisons we can make:

- **1. "First love" is exclusive:** If you really are in love, you love that person exclusively, you want to be true to them. The spiritual application is that these folks at Ephesus used to really be in love with Jesus! They had a fiery, passionate, flaming love for Jesus and it was an exclusive love. But they lost that feeling. One of the problems we have is sometimes when you're in school and high school and even tertiary studies,

() you go with somebody for a while - you get tired of them - you break up with them - and you go with somebody else*

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and just somewhere in the process you just kind of get married and it gets you into this mindset and into this habit and into this cycle so you get tired of this person divorce them and get somebody else. That's why it can be said that "dating causes divorces." No real love is always exclusive. "I love you and nobody else." That's one definition and one characteristic of "first love."

- **2. "First love" is exciting:** Some of you have been married 40 or 50 years and I know you still feel that excitement but can you remember how that first love was? How many of you can remember that first date? That first date is so exciting there is just something special about that first love that makes it exciting. There is nothing dull about it. Not only is it exciting when you have a first love romantically, but when you are in love with Jesus, it's the most exciting thing on earth! There are some people today who are saying, *"I don't want to be a Christian because I want to have fun. I want to live an exciting life!"*

When you fall in love with Jesus Christ, there is an excitement there that only followers of Christ truly understand. There are a lot of people out there who are looking for a thrill. You teenagers know there a lot of your friends who are looking for excitement on Friday and Saturday nights and some kind of a buzz in a six pack of cheap beer or something they smoke or something they pop but there's always the pain of the hangover and the morning after. The good news about Jesus Christ is you can live for Jesus and there's excitement and there's no hangover! There's an excitement that God gives to us that continues, but it has to focus on Christ... that love is exciting and its exclusive.

● **3. “First love” is expectant:** It’s also always expectant, because with first love you are always looking toward the future. You’re always thinking about, “What’s going to happen next?” “Where can we go?” “What can we talk about?” Can you remember, guys? I know you girls don’t do this but do you remember, guys when you had that first love and you were trying to call her up for a date. You know you stood in front of the mirror and practiced it. *“Hello this is John. Woul...wou...would you like to go out with me on Friday night?”* You are so excited and so expectant about what’s going to happen. The good news is once you are a Christian and you are in love with Jesus and He’s your first love, you are always looking forward to what’s going to be happening next. The Bible has a word for that. It is called h-o-p-e. The good news is that for a Christian tomorrow is always better than today and the next day is even better, because the Bible says, *“This is the day the Lord has made. I’ll rejoice and be glad in it.”* The next day we live, we are closer to Jesus than we are this day and that first love always has the element of looking forward expectantly. It’s exclusive! It’s exciting! It’s expectant!

● **4. “First love” is expensive:** I just have to throw this one in. First love is always expensive! I think that was the poorest time in my life, wouldn’t you agree guys? But she was worth it! The same is true with Jesus Christ. When you are in love with Him, it’ll cost you. I’m not talking just financially, although that’s true. It will cost you your time; it will cost you your allegiance; it will cost you your energy. Have you lost that excitement, that zeal and that flame for that first love you had for Jesus? I know you love your church but that’s not what I’m asking. I know you love coming and worshiping, that’s not what I’m asking. I know you love being saved but that’s not what I am asking you. I’m asking you do you love Jesus?

● This is a question Jesus asked Simon Peter after the resurrection, *“Peter, do you love me more than these?”* What do you think he meant by *“these”*? Some people say he meant, “Do you love me more than these guys love me?” A little earlier before Christ was crucified, Jesus said, *“One of you is going to betray me. One of you is going to deny me and all of you are going to leave me.”* And Simon Peter said, *“Not me! These others may leave you, Jesus but I will NEVER leave you!” “I love you, Lord.”* Then, after Peter denied him three times, Jesus said, “Hey, Peter, do you really love me more than these?”

That’s one interpretation. But another way to look at that is when Jesus said, *“Simon Peter, do you love me more than these”* He meant the boats, nets and fish, Peter’s old way of living, his secure way of living. Remember, after the resurrection Peter said, *“I’m going fishing!”*? Jesus was saying, *“Peter, you know you could go back and make a good living fishing but I have other things for you. The big question is, do you love me more than these?”* Peter says, *“Lord you know all things I love you!”* Of course, you know the little interaction there. Jesus said, *“Do you agape me?”* and Simon Peter said, *“Lord, you know I phileo you.”* Agape is 100 percent love; phileo, brotherly love, is about 50 percent love. Jesus said, *“Peter, do you 100 percent love me?”* Peter said, *“Lord, you know I 50 percent love you.”* Jesus said, *“Feed my sheep.”* *“Peter, do you love me more than these? 100 percent love?”* *“Lord, you know I 50 percent love you phileo.”* *“Feed my sheep.”* Then Jesus asked him *“Wait a minute, Peter do you even 50 percent love me?”* He said, *“Do you even phileo me?”* Peter said, *“Lord, you know all things. You know I love you.”* **“FEED MY SHEEP!”**

Jesus didn’t say, “Peter, do you love sheep?” He didn’t even say, “Peter, do you love feeding sheep?” He said, “Do you love me?” You know, if you condense Christianity down to its simplest form – Christianity is simply loving Jesus with all your heart, your soul and your mind. You have a passionate, all-consuming love for Jesus like a first love. Do you remember when you were excited about Jesus? You loved to witness for Him. You loved to serve Him. You were in love with Jesus but you’ve lost the zeal of first love. So, what is Jesus’ prescription for this situation?

● **III. PRESCRIPTION FOR THE CHURCH**

- **1. Remember!** There's something you can do about it. That's the prescription He gives for the church. In 5:1 he says, "**Remember.**" That's the first thing you have to do if you're going to regain that fervent, passionate love for Jesus just remember. Can you remember a time in your life when you were fired up in your love for Jesus? Go back in your mind's eye and remember how it used to be and you'll say, "I want it to be like that again."

I remember when I was 14 years of age and I heard my father preach a sermon about the Prodigal Son, and the cry was there for the lost son to come home to the heavenly Father.. I understood for the first time what Jesus did for me, and that was when I heard God's voice speak to me and He called me to serve Him. That was at the Sunnybank Church of Christ and it was the greatest day of my life! What joy that was. Why don't you do that right now? Just go back in your mind's eye where you were when it was when you were saved. Just remember the love that you had in your heart there for Jesus. That's what Jesus says to do: Just remember!

- **2. Repent!** The second thing He says to do is repent. Repentance is not just for non-Christians but something you continue to do for the rest of your life. It means to change direction. He says, "You're still faithful in church. You're still being diligent! Your doctrine is straight." Your doctrine can be as straight as a gun barrel and just as empty and cold as a gun barrel too. Jesus says, "*But you're going in the wrong direction. You're sliding away in your love for Me. You're getting colder, and colder, and colder.*" Repent means you turn around and say, "Lord, I want to get back close to the fire again. I want to have a burning, consuming, passionate love for you!"

- **3. Repeat!** He says one final thing and it's this, "This is how you can regain that love. Do the things you did at first." Isn't that simple? What does that mean? Repeat. What basic things were you were doing when you first fell in love with Jesus? Do you remember how you were excited about sharing the gospel with other people? Go back and start doing it again. Do you remember how you wanted to study the word? You had a hunger for it. How you wanted to pray? Just go back and repeat. Jesus said, "*Listen. You have a problem! Your problem is you have left that first love. Go back and get it. Remember how it was. Repent and begin to repeat, because if you don't do it I'm going to come and I'm going to remove your lampstand.*" What does that mean? That you're going to lose your salvation? No.. I don't think that's what it means here. No. He says, "I'm going to take your lampstand and I'm just going to remove it." Your light will no longer shine.

- What that means is your influence and your blessing and your impact is going to be removed. I have seen it happen and so have you. Christians who at one time were so fired up for Jesus, faithfully serving but they drifted away from God. They didn't lose their salvation (and only God is the judge of that) but they lost their effectiveness and they lost their blessing and it was as if God took that Christian and set him up on a shelf and said, "I can't use you anymore!" This is why God reminds us numerous times to '*stir up the gift of God, not to quench the Spirit's fire, be more earnest lest we drift away.*' For years and years some Christians have been up on a shelf, ineffective because God removed them from the lampstand. What do you do with a burned-out light bulb? You remove it and throw it away. Jesus said, "You'd better remember! You'd better repent! You'd better repeat! Or I'm going to remove you from your effectiveness." It's a dangerous thing. What a sad, tragic thing it is to see a Christian who has been set aside.

CONCLUSION: But there is good news. If you can recapture that fervent love for Jesus, we are told that you will be given the right to eat from the tree of life. I encourage all of you today, be captured again by Him. Come back to Him. Fall in love again with Him. Don't fool around... serve Him faithfully with all of your heart and be committed only to Him. LET'S PRAY.